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THE RELIGION OF CHILDHOOD. IV

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VII. Habit and Growth in Religion

There are plenty of discussions of religion which seem tacitly to assume that habit has nothing to do with it. Religion is so completely transcendent that it operates, so to speak, quite over the head of habit. What a man is, beyond the complex of his habits, is still an interesting academic question; but society has learned to depend quite thoroughly upon a man's habits in its judgment of him. What a child is becoming, independently of the habits he is forming, might have equal academic interest in some circles; but common-sense folk are quite sure that if his habits are wrong he is not becoming anything worth while.

Biologically speaking, habit is the tendency of an organism to repeat a reaction; or, physiologically, "it is the growth of the nervous system to the modes in which it has been exercised." Now the child comes to birth with a complex of instincts, or "ancestral habits," already established. Of these we have already spoken. It is they which become the basis for the formation of individual habits, and the strongest habits are usually those which are fundamentally grounded in instinct. But there is another and most powerful factor in habit-formation, for habit is formed through the medium of experience, and experience is determined chiefly by the social situation.

The child has, so to speak, the habit-forming habit by inheritance, but what particular habits he will form is determined to a great extent by the habits of his social group. This consideration is highly important. The little child is, as we have seen, highly suggestible, but at the same time he is possessed of but little power to hold his attention to a given end. The first constancies of life are necessarily in the environment. This, if it is wholesome, supports and directs individual effort. But a large proportion of the most powerful habits are very well fixed before habits, as such, are thought of by the child as involving morality, and before they become to any extent matters of conscious attention and effort. So much the more are the habits and temper of the social group matters of primary concern.

Yet the conscious direction of habit-formation may become a factor long before the moral issue emerges. That is to say, the moral issue for the little child lies in the pleasure or displeasure of father and mother. To avoid the one and secure the other the very little child will make conscious effort to act as directed. The parental smile or frown is perhaps the first means of social discipline in habit-formation. It is the first step in that highly organized technique by means of which the elder generation endeavors to direct and steady the attention of the new genera-

tion and to secure the continuous pursuit of certain wholesome activities until they become habitual.

As long as habit-formation is of this degree, the desirability of the habits formed depends largely upon the stage of social and religious culture attained by the group. But, as individuality develops, the individual may make departures from group standards which are quite surprising, and which suggest, not only the great variety of factors in human nature, but also the possibility of novel combination and expression ranging all the way from eccentricity to moral sublimity.

We want, as James suggests, "to make the nervous system our ally and not our enemy," for we realize that the law of habit underlies the whole complex of personal life. It determines largely, not only how we shall act or react in a given situation, but also, in very large measure, the scope of our activity, since our thinking as well as our action is habitual. Thus the intensity and magnitude of the developing personality depend closely upon the habits which are the basis of character.

It needs to be borne in mind that the problem of habit-formation is primarily one of right action, particularly in childhood. As far as the actions of childhood are concerned, they are not directed chiefly by reason, but are determined upon the basis of instinct, impulse, imitation, and suggestion. But it is not the mere doing of the thing in the right way which assures the active formation of a proper habit, it is rather the interested and successful doing of the thing suggested which is conclusive in habit-formation. Interest and success assure

the proper "set" of the activity in the nervous system.

How to make right doing interesting is no small question, and it does not diminish by being applied to childhood, for the obvious reason that the range of the child's interests is comparatively narrow, to which must be added the fact that he has no unified ideal of life inspiring him to act consistently. Right doing divorced from the situations and activities to which the child's instinctive equipment impels him can never be made attractive. It must be popular with his social group or carry with it some attractive and immediate reward or it will not be persistently undertaken. The available motives lie close to childish interest, and when they fail, appeal to compulsion may bridge the gap. But compulsion alone cannot accomplish the desired end.

Under such discipline and inspiration we may think of the child as growing up with habits of cleanliness, courtesy, obedience, truthfulness, honor, and the rest. But we are likely to be asked what these have to do with religion. It is highly desirable to define religion in such terms as shall recognize it as a group experience and possession as well as an individual experience. Thought of in such fashion, the question whether the child is religious in being cleanly, courteous, truthful, etc., is dependent upon whether his social group is religious in being cleanly, courteous, truthful, etc.; for religion is, after all, more the temper of life than a set of ideas or of cult practices. If, in the life of the home, there is a genuine trust in God which interpenetrates all its mutual trust, a real spirit of love and good-will kindled by the love and service of Jesus that runs

through all its activities, it is safe to say that the child who grows up therein will become partaker of them. They will belong to him just as truly as the customary household decorum. But if these things are wanting, no amount of cleanliness, courtesy, and truthfulness can quite compensate for them.

Moreover, this spirit of religion needs to be embodied. It should exist, not only as the heart of all confidence and the basis of all love and service, but also as a certain group of home practices in religion of the sort indicated earlier in this discussion. In this series of home practices the child will have some definite and recognized part, and they will be conscientiously shaped so as to have meaning for him. By thus sharing in the ritual of home religion, the child will build up a set of religious habits which will not only serve current need, but will serve as the basis of a more extensive series in youth and maturity.

By far the most significant part of habit-formation in childhood, in so far as it relates specifically to religion, is that which establishes in the child the characteristic emotional attitudes of religion—the attitudes of reverence, love, trust, and the like. These articulate directly with the characteristic attitudes of social morality—good-will, sympathy, fellowship, etc., and with the more typically individual qualities of honesty, truthfulness, courtesy, etc. Whether the child will realize the emotional attitudes of personal religion depends largely upon the sort of religion with which his family makes him familiar; if religious ceremonial takes the place of the religious spirit, the child has a very poor

chance to know anything about them. Reverence, love, and trust cannot be abstractly taught to childhood. The child has no ability for abstract thinking, but great ability to absorb the ideals of concrete living.

If mere instruction could suffice, the problem of the church school would be far simpler. Great numbers of children are in the care of the church for whose religious nurture the home does little or nothing. The problem thus becomes one of establishing a vitally religious group in whose activities and spirit such children shall continuously share. The church school has succeeded only in part, and it has become quite evident that there is no substitute for home nurture in religion. To succeed more amply the church school must greatly enlarge its expressional, play, and service activities, and must find a way to spend more time with the children. The church must invest more in leadership, in equipment, and training, but it must also give more time. Just because so large a part of its staff is made up of unpaid, voluntary workers, this is difficult of realization. Whether the home is religious but one day in seven, and then only formally, or is vitally religious seven days in the week, or even if the home is not religious at all, childhood goes on every waking hour of every day building up the structure of habit which is the ultimate basis of its character. Who shall say that growth in religion is not vitally conditioned by this process? Does anyone suppose that a cataclysmic change some years later on can undo what these years have done or accomplish what these years have failed to accomplish?